

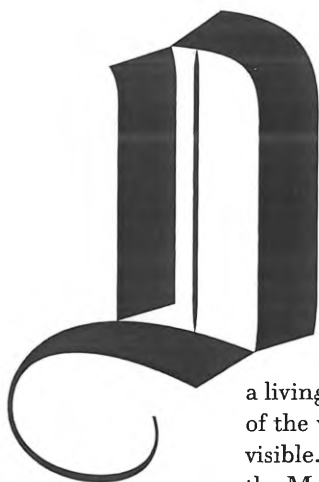
Grietje Dresen, Love gave You a thousand names. Veneration and representation of the Blessed Virgin Mary as an identity strategy.

In: G. Rooijackers (ed.), *Backlit Heaven. Power and devotion in the archdiocese Mechelen*, Tielt: Lannoo 2009, pp. 66-83

Love gave You a thousand names

Veneration and representation of the Blessed Virgin Mary as an identity strategy

For anyone who has grown up in a Catholic environment, Mary's presence is self-evident. In church, at home, along the roadside: everywhere the eye descries her figure. The veneration of saints, and of Mary in particular, is certainly one of the principal religious practices with which the Church of Rome distinguishes itself from the Protestant churches. Of course there are other, more essential differences, like the central place of the Scriptures in the Protestant churches and the position of the clergy in the Catholic Church. But for 'normal' Catholics, the possibility of turning to the Mother of God in times of worry and unhappiness is undoubtedly an important, if not the most important, part of their perception of their faith.



Dimensions of Marian devotion

In those countries and regions where Catholicism has remained a living popular religion, the central position of the veneration of Mary is still clearly visible. However abstract and inscrutable the Marian dogmas may appear to lay people (for example, the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception¹ was and still is regularly confused with her perpetual virginity), our Lady is very concretely present in her familiar, local forms. As Our Lady of Halle, Scherpenheuvel or at one of the countless other religious sites or churches in Europe and beyond, she functions, for her devotees, as a both numinous and tangibly close Mother: a Mother of God (or Mother God) who comforts, understands and mediates. Whether in a majestic basilica or a modest country chapel, for the faithful, she is Our Lady in this concrete, miracle-working form. In the Counter-Reformation, or more accurately: the Catholic Reformation, Marian devotion took on an additional dimension. The reformers had rejected the veneration of Mary (and of other saints). To them, Mary remained the specially chosen mother of Jesus, but stripped of her quasi-divine and grace-mediating status. This gave the

Catholic church a valuable trump card in its renewed Contra-Reformation armoury. Seeking protection and comfort in a mother figure with traits of the sacred is probably a basic human tendency going back to our earliest experiences, in whatever culture. Even of Luther who, indignant at the debased Catholic trade of indulgences, was the first systematically to reject all veneration of saints, it is known that as a young man in danger of death he invoked Anne, the mother of God, the mother of mothers. This father of the Reformation was initially very much aware that one cannot just cast aside ones saints, and certainly not one's mother saints.² The Catholic Church, for its part, made thankful use of their advantage, while being careful not to allow Mary's salvific role to outgrow that of her Son and combating excessively fanciful devotions. Mary is prominently present in Counter-Reform imagery: as the ultimate –divine but simultaneously human – Mother, as Queen of Heaven and as a sublime symbol of the victory over evil and sin (symbolized by the snake under her feet and her garments, which become steadily whiter over the centuries). In the period covered by *Backlit Heaven*, the emphasis in popular Marian iconography shifts from the former to the latter category even if, in most cases, we are confronted with mixed forms, also literally when older images are given new elements – an exhibition throne, crowns, a new garment.

In this essay, I will limit myself to certain characteristic expressions of Marian devotion in the archdiocese of Mechelen and to developments within it. My approach is not that of a historian, but of a moral theologian interested in cultural history. My particular attention goes to the ambivalent appreciation of the body in the Catholic tradition and, more specifically, to the way it is expressed in Marian symbolism and the shifts within it. In other words, I shall be concentrating, first of all, on the characteristic way the body is both glorified and trampled underfoot in the Catholic tradition and, secondly, on the impact of this combination on mariology.³

The body: bearer of salvation but spoiled by sin

•
'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.' This sentence (from the start of the Gospel of Saint John) encapsulates the key component of the Christian account of salvation. God took flesh and became man in order to redeem man. For centuries, countless Christians received this as a self-evident truth of faith. Church fathers and medieval theologians could still be deeply amazed at the paradox that the one, eternal and almighty God would desire to be born of a woman, as an indigent human child. But the rich pictorial language surrounding Christ's birth probably meant that normal believers had less difficulty with this



70. *Scherpenheuvel votive panel*, Veldhoven (NL), 't Oude Slot Museum [see fig. 86]



71. *Anna-ten-Drieën*, Bottelare (Merelbeke), Saint Anna [see fig. 87]



72. *Crown of Our Lady*, Brussels, Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-ter-Kapelle [see fig. 89]

unheard-of paradox. A God born in a stable and dying on a cross, again naked and fragile: for anyone familiar with Christian symbolism, these were scarcely scandalous components of the wider Christian salvation narrative.

In the salvation narrative, the body played a central role. Already in the Old Testament creation story of Genesis, positive value is attributed to mankind's corporeality and sexuality. The 'flesh' may well have become rebellious, fragile and mortal as a result of the fall, but man's human body remains the primary tool of salvation, the place in which salvation becomes tangible and experiential. This is expressed in the central Christian dogma of the incarnation, but also in a number of Gospel narratives in which faith is inseparably linked to the healing of, or care for, the suffering body. The final salvation at the end of time is also expressed in the image of the resurrection of the body. Despite the central place played by the body in salvation symbolism, Christianity has frequently been accused – in particular since the sixties of the previous century – of being 'body-hostile'. Where did this hostility to the body come from? The origins are as old as Christianity itself, and even older, and are related to the fact of human experience that the body is not only a source of blessedness but, first and foremost, a demanding burden. The latter applies all the more in less healthy and prosperous times than our own. The very real fragility, neediness and mortality of the body lie behind the call to devote oneself to immortal things of the spirit, the things of God – a call formulated not only by early Christianity, but also by many philosophers and gnostic movements of the time.



Sin, fall and salvation

Early Christianity used the idea of the fall as an explanation for the suffering and evil in the world. Taking a contrary position to dualistically thinking gnostic groups, who believed that the human soul sits imprisoned in a defiled body, the Church fathers accepted the creating God of Genesis (i.e.: the God who created matter) as the same one and eternal God of whom, for example, the prologue to the Gospel of Saint John speaks with images like eternal Word (*logos*) and eternal Light. Hence the fact that the earliest creeds all begin with the confession that there is one God, the creator of heaven *and* earth.⁴ God created the earth as good, but as a result of the sin of the first human beings the original natural harmony was 'corrupted', tainted. One has only to remember the curse that God spoke over Adam and Eve: 'Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.' Adam will have to drudge for his bread and Eve and her gender-companions are placed under man's mastery and will bring forth their children in sorrow. Man is shut out from paradise.

And in recognizing Jesus as the long-expected Messiah, who died to redeem us (and who, himself God, took flesh for this purpose), early Christianity referred back directly to this curse. Jesus was said to have redeemed us from the most incisive aspect of 'original sin' (a concept coined by church father Augustine), the eternal banishment from Paradise. As early as Paul, the comparison is made with Adam: 'As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive'.⁵ For later mariology and certainly for the dogma of the Immaculate Conception these passages became essential. For just as Christ was to be called the 'second Adam' through his redeeming death on the cross, so Mary would feature in the Church's mariology as a 'second Eve'. Just as Eve and her gender-companions were called the 'gate of hell' owing to their weakness and their seductive power (among others by Church father Tertullian, avidly cited in countless *Summae* and in Heinrich Kramer's *Heksenhamer* (1486)), so Mary would carry *porta caeli*, 'gate of heaven', as one of her honorary titles.

73. *Mourning with Beguine as Donor*, Mechelen, Beguinage Church Saint Alexius and Catharine [see fig. 90]

74.
Annunciation,
Schorisse
(Maarkedal),
Saint Peter
[see fig. 91]



Nature, including human nature, is seen as having been brought, by the fall, into disharmony with God's original order of creation. Already Paul uses the concept of 'sin' in referring to this disharmony in human beings, but also the concept of 'flesh' (*sarx*; as, in particular, in his letter to the Romans). By 'flesh', Paul understood not only physical desires, but all desires and tendencies that deviated human beings from what Jewish law and Jesus Christ revealed to them as (the way to) their salvation. By naming man's nature, which had become sinful, 'flesh', this Pauline pictorial language largely contributed to what was later known as body-hostility in the Christian tradition. Moreover, in the later Christological dogmas, it was emphasized that God became fully man ('born of the Virgin Mary') with one important exception: Christ was not tainted by original sin (and in this sense did not take on flesh in the Pauline, mainly in the pejorative sense of the word).⁶ In this sense Jesus was, so to speak, ahead of his own redemptive work and possessed the sinless nature of Adam before the fall. Theologically-anthropologically, this was also self-evident ever since Augustine's introduction of the concept of original sin given that, according to him, this was passed on via the human seed. Of human seed there was, of course, no question in Jesus' conception in the womb of a virgin. In the view of the Church fathers, the virginal conception was, therefore, very much a question of principle.

Christ was fully God (Mary 'bore God' as the Council of Ephesus declared), but also fully man (and, for this reason, was born of a woman), with the special feature that he was born without sin (and hence: not from sex).

Rebellious flesh

The fact that male seed and sexual relations were viewed as a vehicle of original sin had major consequences for the Church's image of human beings, and therefore needs to be examined somewhat more closely. The last Church father, Augustine (354-430), synthesizes his predecessors' thoughts on the subject, becoming together, with Paul, the single most important source of the Christian anthropology of this early period. In the area of sexual morality his thinking has remained effective until today (for example, in the ban on contraceptives).⁷ Augustine's association of original sin and sexuality also had major consequences for mariology and the (relatively late) proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, as we shall see later. When the dogma was finally pronounced by Pius IX in 1854, thus giving a new impulse to the veneration (and representation) of Mary, the association of sex and sin appears to have again played a part in the ecclesiastical-political and moral-political considerations motivating the proclamation of the dogma.

In Augustine's eyes too, 'flesh' and 'desire' were not limited, in principle, to bodily or sexual desires. Mental sins such as pride, idleness and avarice were also included under it. But sexual desire was, to him, the symbol *par excellence* of what had happened in the fall. It is precisely in sexual desire that the rebelliousness of the 'flesh' against reason and will was manifested. This rebelliousness was punishment for the revolt of the first humans against God, represented in exemplary fashion, for Augustine, by the 'uprising' of the male member – a *consequence* of sin, but also the most visible sign of man's fallen, sinful nature. This close association of sexuality and sin is found not only in his own writings, but also in those of the other Church fathers. It also typifies the iconography of the fall (linking into the passage in Gene-

sis in which Adam and Eve, after eating from the forbidden tree, become aware of their nakedness) and returns in Christian art in general, from the representation of Mary Magdalene or the temptations of Saint Antony to the alarming depiction of hell punishments for unchastity. Sexual desire, in particular, was seen as 'enslaving' man to his rebellious flesh. Which is why most Church fathers gave preference to remaining celibate, in order to keep hands and spirit free for the things of God.⁸ The Catholic tradition would later institutionalize this preference as a precondition for the priesthood. This development was definitively confirmed at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), in reaction to its rejection in principle by Luther (who regarded obligatory celibacy as a misplaced, arrogant way of guiding sexual desire on to good paths, and the priesthood itself as an at least equally misplaced form of institutional mediation of salvation).⁹

Mary as Heavenly Woman

In reaction to the Reformers' attacks, the Catholic church not only tightened up its obligation of celibacy but, as mentioned earlier, profiled itself by emphasizing and developing Mary's role in the history of salvation. In so doing it did not limit itself, on the Protestant model, to the simple biblical maiden who became the Mother of God, but developed Mary theologically and pastorally as a powerful, superhuman Queen of Heaven and mediator of grace (i.e. as an intercessor in front of God via her son Jesus, a concept which was and still is an abomination for Protestants). For contemporary Catholics these are self-evident images and, for this reason, it is good to realize that it is precisely these images that were part of a conscious identity strategy of the Church, also and precisely where these linked into older 'pagan' representations and practices. For its Counter-Reformational offensive, the Church reached back to previously formulated Marian dogmas and other insights that had grown up in the tradition concerning Mary's role in the distribution of salvation. In this it was backed theologically by the canonical authority that the Council of Trent granted

to its own tradition, recognized as orthodox. The decree in question on the canonical authority of tradition (alongside that of the Scriptures, on which the reformers had placed total weight) was not formulated *with a view to* the veneration of Mary, but had the greatest possible significance for it. The main insights concerning Mary that the Church would introduce were not taken directly from Scripture, but were the result of ingenious, metaphorical textual exercises interlinking Mary's role in a number of ways with that of the Church. The Counter-Reformational image policy picks up the earlier interlinking of Mary and Church. In order to understand this better, I will first look at the development of the veneration of Mary in the preceding centuries.

In the first five centuries of Christianity, the Church fathers gave thought to Mary, but solely as a function of Christology and soteriology. There was hardly any talk of Marian devotion – at least not in the form taken later, with special feasts and sanctuaries. In the view of the Church fathers, it was her virginity that was essential to her role as Mother of God. This was Biblically-based and, in terms of the account of salvation, further developed in Augustine's theological anthropology: Mary's virginity made it possible for Christ to become man without the transmission of original sin. Around the fourth century, it also became customary to view this virginity as perpetual: before, during and after giving birth. This 'permanent' virginity is christologically unnecessary, having more to do with the association of sexuality and sin, and with the interpretation of Mary's role as the second Eve. If Mary was worthy to bear the Saviour, she had in principle and fundamentally to be more sinless than normal women. From this time onwards, people began to ponder what was later accepted as the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the idea that Mary was possibly spared from original sin and therefore – just like her Son – remained entirely free from sin. Theologically speaking it was not easy to get this idea accepted, because in this way Mary also ran ahead of her Son's redemptive work and she – just like He – seemed to acquire a divine status. How, moreover, was sinlessness

conceivable if Mary herself had been the product of normal sexual relations? Augustine's teaching on original sin remained a burdensome obstacle here. No wonder that fifteen centuries of much heated discussion were required before the Church came up with a formal pronouncement.

But without this pronouncement, the star of Mary's particular holiness was on the ascendant.

Whereas, in the first centuries, she was still outstripped by the fame of women martyrs and holy virgins, from the fifth century onwards she began to have her own feasts in the Byzantine calendar and was also increasingly depicted. Isolated (i.e. non-repetitive) depictions of Mary can be found in the first instance in the East, stylized according to the Marian iconography of Byzantine iconography. In Rome she is found sporadically in churches from this period, mostly clothed in royal vestments and, as *regina caeli*, crowned or enthroned. Mary was associated already by the Church fathers with the Church, and her regal role in these early depictions reflects the high aspirations to power of the Church of Rome and the entanglement of ecclesiastical and worldly power.

From the high Middle Ages onwards, more and more churches in the West were dedicated to Mary, and from the twelfth century onwards most of them carried her at once courtly-respectful and familiar honorific *Our Lady*

(translated in the Middle Dutch as *Onze-Lieve-Vrouw*¹⁰). In these churches, but also in manuscript illuminations and later on panel paintings, Mary is depicted mostly in scenes representing episodes from her own life¹¹ or that of Jesus. But, more and more, she is also shown separately, in one of the symbolic roles that the Church fathers and later theologians attributed to her. A central symbolic theme, following on from Mary's sinless nature and enriched from early Christian times by apocryphical writings, is her being spared from the return to dust and instead being assumed into heaven after first 'falling asleep' (*Dormitio Mariae*). Just like the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, with which it is closely connected, the dogma of the Assumption was pronounced only very late (in 1950!). But the representation itself was accepted very early on in the Catholic tradition as the necessary symbolization of Mary's role as the sinless Mother of God, spared from the curse spoken over the first man. Assumed into heaven, Mary could also take on the role of Queen of Heaven and mediator, which were to become so important in the tradition – and certainly in the Counter-Reformation. For learned Catholics and the faithful, her undoubted place was therefore in heaven, next to her Son (constantly outgrowing Him in terms of her role in the mediation of salvation – even if the Church insisted that she mediated only as a mother: *per Mariam ad Jesum* [‘Through Mary to Jesus’]).

Mary as Bride

A key turning point in the personification and internalization of the veneration of Mary was the sermons on the Song of Songs by the great twelfth-century mystical theologian Bernard of Clairvaux. The images from the Song of Songs singing the praise of the beloved – highly erotic, but interpreted metaphorically by tradition – became more widespread and familiar through Bernard's sermons. This symbolism of the bride from the Song of Songs was increasingly applied, and ever more personally, to Mary. Already for Bernard, she was the chosen bride. The use of this symbolism has its forerunners in theology

75.
Sedes sapientiae,
Kapellen (Glabbeek),
*Onze-Lieve-
Vrouw-Geboorte*
[see fig. 92]



76. *Mary speaks to Jesus in favour of the salvation of the souls*, Sint-Katherina-Lombeek (Ternat), Saint Catharine [see fig. 93]



and mystical contemplation, only to return later in the visual arts. That, in principle, the virgin Mother of God could inherit the sensuous imagery surrounding the bride from the Song of Songs may seem strange, but—at least theologically—this was closely connected with her role as the second Eve or Mother of the Living. In this role she was identified from early Christianity with the Church as Mother. And the Church, in turn, was seen, from earliest times, as the body or bride of Christ, linking in with already longer-existing interpretations of the Song of Songs, with the imagery of Ephesians 5 and, in particular, with the figure of the Bride of the Apocalypse, viewed as the symbol of the Church community. The images depicting the Woman and the Bride found in the Book of Revelation¹² also return, increasingly from the late Middle Ages onwards, in Marian symbolism. From the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries onwards—the Counter-Reformation period—they coalesce into a more or less fixed imagery of the Immaculate Conception, for which Diego Velázquez's famous painting can be seen as a prototype. By way of preference the *Immaculata* is represented as a young woman without child, standing on a dragon or moon (mostly crescent, but occasionally a full moon), with twelve stars around her head (often developed into a crown) and a background visualizing her heavenly habitat: sometimes clouds, sometimes an aura of sunbeams

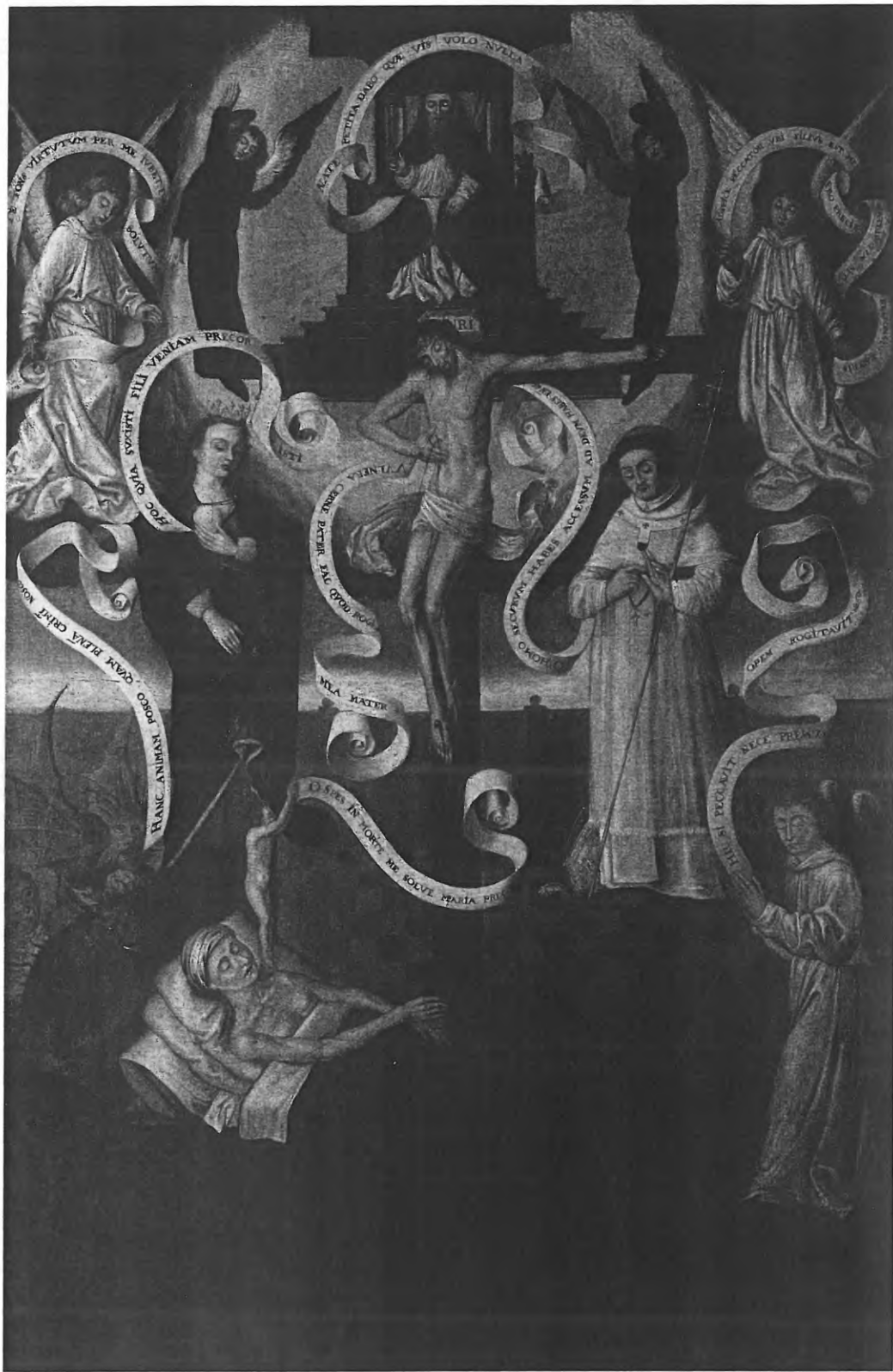
referring to Revelations 12:1 and preferably both. Combined with Marian symbols borrowed from the Song of Songs—including sinlessness itself¹³ but also the image of Mary as an enclosed garden, ivory tower, or Tower of David¹⁴—we will see the apocalyptic symbolism return in the architecture of Scherpenheuvel as a bulwark of Counter-Reformational veneration of Mary.

Mary as the logo of a church on the offensive

Enclosed garden, ivory tower, gate of heaven. Radiant solar auras and associations with stars (Star of the Sea, Morning Star). The Marian imagery of the Counter-Reformation gratefully drew from the Biblical images that fifteen centuries of Christianity had attributed to Mary in order to represent her special role in God's plan of salvation.¹⁵ No doubt not just theological discussions but also the Church's expansionary thrust played a role in this representational tradition, combined with a well-proven pastoral inventiveness in latching onto existing veneration and symbolization practices. To such practices belong, in almost every culture, the symbolization and sacralization of the capacities attributed to women and to the feminine, associated in most cases with the cycle of life and death, birth and rebirth. In most cases these capacities are also associated with symbols of the natural cycle or fertility, such as fruit, trees or the earth (the earth as



77. *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Hermann-Joseph von Steinfeld*, Ruisbroek (Puurs), Saint Catharine [see fig. 94]



78. *Allegory of the Good Death*, Heverlee (Leuven),
Norbertine Abbey of the Park [see fig. 95]

the womb of new life, 'Mother Earth'). Right from the beginning, Christianity was keen to project human salvation outside the natural cycle. This it did through literally taking the symbolism of birth and rebirth and converting and rebaptizing it into rebirth in Christ. That means: conversion and baptism into spiritual life, transcending the mortality of the body.¹⁶ Reproduction and death remain predominantly associated with women. As daughters of Eve, and as Alma Mater and Bride of Christ the Church took to itself the positive aspects of 'women's work'.

It was undoubtedly a stroke of mastery by the Church to also connect the female, nourishing and life-giving functions that it attributed to itself, with Mary. Or to put it better the other way round, to bring Mary, as the inheritor of ancient and widespread practices of veneration, into connection with *itself*. This it did not only with an ingenious connection of mariology and ecclesiology (interwoven with the redemption paradigm and for modern ears inimitable), but first and foremost practically, by latching the veneration of Mary on to existing fertility symbols and turning a blind eye to her growing into the figurehead of the Catholic faith.

Nowhere is the combination of these two strategies more visible than in the major Marian pilgrimage sites that have come into being over the past four hundred and fifty years, both inside and outside the archdiocese of Mechelen. Starting with local and mostly rural practices of veneration, and frequently regarded with suspicion by the Church, these sites developed, under supervision of the clergy, into showpieces in which the Church connected its own role and claims (to power) with the locally venerated (apparitions of) Mary, only to be slowly but surely reappropriated by a popular tradition which had little in common with the Church's claims and followed its own agenda. In this paragraph, I shall first focus on the largest – and for the period in question most characteristic – pilgrimage site that came into being during this period, Scherpenheuvel.¹⁷ From the 'steep hill' at Zichem we will then look for related – at times older, at times younger – Marian images.

Maria-in-de-eik (Mary-in-the-Oak)

Devotion to Our Lady of Scherpenheuvel goes back to before 1500, at least according to the investigation into the miracle-working qualities of the image carried out by Philips Numan at the behest of Archbishop Mathias Hovius of Mechelen. Following the ecclesiastical recognition of the investigated miracles, his study appeared in book form in 1604. According to Numan's informants, around 1500 a miracle had taken place in connection with an image of Mary which had already been hanging for many years in an oak on the steep hill. A shepherd wanted to carry home the image, which had fallen to the ground, but it seemed heavy as lead. So were his legs. The shepherd could not move one step further. This incident – which incidentally is not unique to Scherpenheuvel, but which appears in similar fashion in the prehistory of other pilgrimage sites – was interpreted as a sign that Mary wished to be venerated there, on that site. From then on, the miracle-working Mary-in-the-Oak appears to have become a favourite pilgrim destination. The original image disappeared in 1580, when the area fell prey to border skirmishing between Spain and the Northern Netherlands. With armies from both sides making the area unsafe for many years, it was only in 1587 that a new image was placed in the oak, the one which can still be found in the present basilica church. Mary-in-the-Oak was visited by local believers for her miraculous healing powers: most of the miracles that Numan lists in 1604 are healings. The two best known of these – that of the crippled Hans Clements and the possessed woman Catherine du Bus – are rarely absent in the later iconography of Our Lady of Scherpenheuvel. Catherine was healed by swallowing a splinter of wood from the oak, forcing the devil to leave her body. Such use of wood splinters or bits of bark was viewed as a proven method, and shows how the healing powers of Mary and the oak were seen as in line with one another. To better channel the growing devotion in paths acceptable to the Church, the local priest in Zichem, in consultation with the ecclesiastical

authorities, had the image placed, in 1602, in a little wooden chapel. Pilgrims continued to stream in, seldom leaving the site without taking a piece of bark or twig from the tree with them. Even before Numan began his investigation in 1603, Joannes Miraeus, the Bishop of Antwerp, sent by Hovius to make a preliminary investigation, ordered the oak, made dangerous by pilgrims cutting away at it, to be cut down. The wood from the felled oak was kept and distributed for carving little images of Mary. The 'heathen' magic of the tree was exorcized in this way (albeit not to the extent the reformers would have wished: in 1606 indulgences were attached to the various cult practices in Scherpenheuveel and to prayers in front of all Marian images carved out of the oak).¹⁸

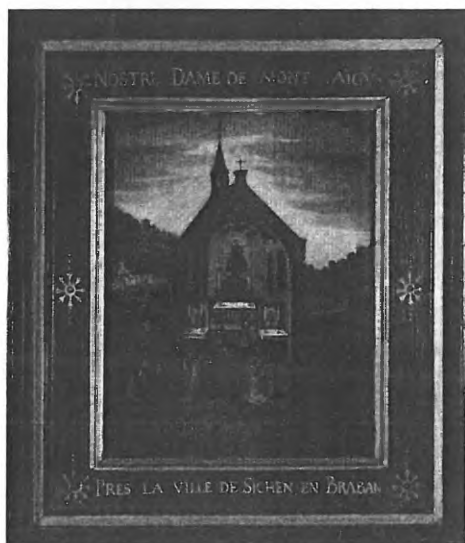
The fame of Our Lady of Scherpenheuveel suddenly accelerated in 1603: in January of that year individual aldermen saw drops of blood appear on the lips of the image. Our Lady was seen as bleeding for the unfaithful Netherlands. Later, that same year, she put up a good show in the struggle of the Habsburg monarchy against the armies of the Northern Netherlands. The fame of the blood on the Virgin's lips also reached the deeply religious local representatives of the monarchy, Archduke Albrecht and his wife Isabella (daughter of the Spanish king). In July of that year – even before the ecclesiastical recognition of the veneration – they sent three hundred Brabant guilders to Zichem to build a stone chapel. When shortly thereafter 's-Hertogenbosch failed to fall into the hands of Count Maurice of Nassau, they attributed this to Our Lady of Scherpenheuveel and redeemed

their promise of a pilgrimage in her honour. This was the first of a long series and the beginning of an association which would permit the majestic extension of Scherpenheuveel. When Numan completed his report in 1604, it already included the rescue of 's-Hertogenbosch with the help of Our Lady of Scherpenheuveel. The archbishop cast hesitation aside and approved the veneration and the publication of Numan's report. The book appeared in several languages and was repeatedly reprinted and added to. The clerical supervision and the extension of the pilgrimage site were quickly arranged. The stone chapel which had since been built was already too small when consecrated by Hovius in June 1604; on Marian feastdays thousands of pilgrims travelled to the hill. Plans were therefore rapidly made for a larger church. Encouragement came from the Archducal couple, who were keen to transform the sacred site into a national sanctuary. In 1607, they ordered the design and building of a large-scale domed church, underwriting part of the financing with major donations. At the time the pilgrimage site was also generating income through the offertory box, larger donations, and the sale of candles and later also medals, little flags and other souvenirs. From 1610 onwards the incoming funds were managed by a separate pastor and, from 1624 onwards, by the Oratorians, a secular religious group who were not tied by permanent vows.

A litany in stone

Albrecht and Isabella's court architect, Wenceslas Coeberger (c. 1560–1634), was given the task of making Scherpenheuveel into a Marian bulwark and a witness of Catholicism to the close-by states. Not only was the miracle-working image to dwell in a majestic domed church – the first of its kind in this part of the world – but around the church a 'closed court' and a small, fortified town were also planned. The church, the court and the street plan around them were designed on the basis of Marian symbolism, intended to express architecturally Mary's significance as *Regina coeli*. A major source of inspiration were the

79. The first chapel of Scherpenheuveel, Scherpenheuveel (Scherpenheuveel-Zichem), Our Lady Basilica [see fig. 96]



many biblical and non-biblical honorific titles attributed to Mary in previous centuries which, in 1601, were sanctioned by the pope in the form of the Litany of Loreto. The Basilica of Loreto itself, built around the *Santa Casa* in which the Virgin is supposed to have lived, served as a significant example, not only for Albrecht and Isabella – who were devotionally and financially closely linked with Loreto – but also for Philips Numan, who regularly refers to Loreto as a comparison for the significance of Scherpenheuvel.¹⁹ Another major source of inspiration was the popular emblem literature, in which Marian symbolism was developed even more inventively and with even richer imagery.

The *Pancarpium Marianum* of the Jesuit Jan Davids, who excelled in this genre, appears to have inspired Scherpenheuvel's designers in particular. In any event, not only well-known images of Mary, such as the Enclosed Garden, the Gate of Heaven and the Tower of David were incorporated into the design of the domed church and fortress, but also less customary ones, coming from the creative imagery of emblem literature. Images associating Mary with the Holy City (Revelation 21), the Strong City (Isaiah 26) or the City of Refuge (Numbers 35) and other better-known honorific titles (such as Refuge of Sinners, in the Litany of Loreto) could be provided with brief inscriptions and a corresponding text, according to the principle of emblem literature. The Marian emblem symbolism was particularly rich – in part due to the emphasis on the image – particularly rich in architectural symbols (city, temple, gate, tower, staircase, fountain, court, etc.).²⁰ But the image that most placed its stamp on Scherpenheuvel's architecture was, without any doubt, the identification of Mary with stars, or with the Morning Star (*Stella Matutina*, as in the Litany of Loreto). The star shape that returns over and again in the design was combined with the sacred number seven: the stars on the ground plan of the church, the enclosed courtyard and the original fortifications, as well as the 298 gilded stars on the roof of the cupola – no doubt intended to gleam at a distance – all have seven points.

Seven was viewed in the Old Testament as a holy number, a blessed unit. In the gospels, this number is less symbolically charged, but all the more so in the Book of Revelation. Catholic tradition has always attempted to list holy or, equally, unholy things (sacraments, gifts of the spirit, virtues, sins, etc.) in series of seven. It did this, of course, in connection with Mary, heavily clothed with apocalyptic symbolism. Since the late Middle Ages, pious Catholics had gladly meditated on the seven joys or seven sorrows of Mary (the joys of Mary being a favourite theme in Middle Dutch mystery plays). There were also seven situations in which it was particularly important to invoke Mary. Albrecht and Isabella maintained a deep devotion to the Seven Sorrows of our Lady, which is precisely why they were so touched in 1603 by the rumour of the blood miracle of Scherpenheuvel.²¹ For this reason, as early as 1605, Albrecht ordered the placing, in the walled garden around the chapel of: *veertien statien oft capellekens vert-hoonende die blyschappen ende droefheden van die Heilige Moeder Godts, in sulcker manieren geset synde dat den geheelen berch van Scherpenheuvel sal hebben die ghedaente van eene sterre* ('fourteen stations or little chapels showing the joys and sorrows of the Holy Mother of God, set in such a way that the entire hill of Scherpenheuvel shall take on the form of a star').²²

This assignment predates the design of the church and the street plan. This means that the idea of laying out the court in the shape of a star (linking into the shape of the hill) was early and may have come from Albert himself. It was picked up later in the Italianate style of church building, in the street plan and the fortifications.



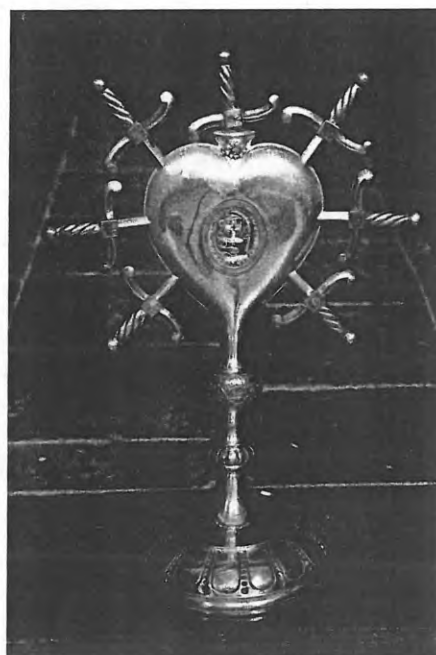
80. Devotion Print of the House of Loreto, Mechelen, Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels collection [see fig. 97]

Other honorific titles of Mary in the Litany of Loreto also played a role in the design of Scherpenheuvel. One which means little to us today, but was also the more meaningful to Church militants of the time, was the invocation of Mary as Ark of the Covenant and related titles: spiritual vessel, honourable vessel, and golden house. In emblem literature, such titles were often represented as temples, referring to that of Solomon, an allegorical temple of wisdom, or the apocalyptic Golden City. For the Counter-Reformation Church these and similar titles represented Mary's essential place in God's plan of salvation: she was the blessed among women, destined from before time to carry the Redeemer in her immaculate womb, becoming in this way the Ark of Gods *new* Covenant with man (the unity of which was now at risk). The design of Scherpenheuvel as a whole was intended as a 'litany in stone'²³ and is, as such, an unequalled example of allegorical architecture.

Mater Creatoris

In the decoration of the church, both inside and outside, symbolic numbering is developed even further. This applies to the towers, the starred cupola, and to 'Jacob's ladder', but naturally, even more, to the countless sculptures, ornaments and paintings both inside and outside the church. The high altar with the miraculous image above it was placed where the oak tree once stood. The most important paintings are the seven baroque altarpieces commissioned from Theodoor van Loon by the architect and which still hang in the basilica (albeit in a changed deployment). They represent episodes from the life of the Virgin. In the most important side chapel, to the right of the high altar, originally hung the meeting of Joachim and Anne under the Golden Gate. This apocryphal narrative was seen as the representation of the immaculate conception of Mary, which led to her being free, like her Son, of original sin.²⁴

Albrecht and Isabella were fervent 'immaculists' and, at the time they were building and furnishing the church, made various attempts to have the Pope recognize the Immaculate Con-



81.
Reliquary,
Héவில்
(Mont-Saint-Guibert),
Saint Gertrude
[see fig. 98]

ception as a dogma of the Church. However, Pope Paul V considered it inopportune to settle the centuries-old and at the time vigorous combat between maculists and immaculists with a dogma placing Mary outside the natural order of things – even if he would appear to have been favourably inclined to the immaculist arguments²⁵ – calling for calm in the debate. The archdukes abandoned their Rome-wards missions, but the design of Scherpenheuvel and the furnishing of the church testify in a number of places to their personal conviction. The simple Mary-in-the-Oak was clothed in regal garments (the first of which was donated, in Spanish custom, by Isabella) and her cult site extended to an allegory of the Madonna of the Apocalypse. Characteristic of the Mary of the Apocalypse – as mentioned earlier – were attributes referring to her heavenly habitat, such as a fiery sun, moon and stars, and her triumph over Satan, represented as a snake or dragon. At Scherpenheuvel, these elements can be recognized in various forms. Applied separately or incorporated into baroque scenes (like the glorious Assumption frontally on the high altar), they all refer to the belief that the *Mater Creatoris*²⁶ has to be a supernatural – and thus sinless – Mother of God.

82.

Antependium,
Scherpenheuvel
(Scherpenheuvel-
Zichem),
Our Lady Basilica
[see fig. 99]



Work on building and furnishing the baroque church took twenty years. Albrecht did not live to see its dedication in 1627, but Isabella came on foot from Diest for the ceremony. After the service, as an offering and gesture of detachment, she cast her jewellery on to the steps of the high altar, thereby instituting a custom. Scherpenheuvel grew into the most frequently visited pilgrimage site in Belgium. It is unlikely that the millions of pilgrims who would visit the site in the coming centuries always grasped the carefully construed symbolic number or the combative message of the design. They came for the fame of the wonder-working Madonna – even if the impressive cupola on the steep hill further increased the fame of the site. The victory over the Northern Netherlands (that the Habsburgs had dreamed of) never came about, and from 1760 onwards the influence of their dynasty and their piety disappeared. The special order of Oratorians, which managed the site until its dissolution under the French occupation, managed to uphold the relatively elevated spirituality in the practice of the cult. Under the French Republic, public worship was forbidden, until the Napoleonic concordat with Rome in 1801 restored freedom of worship.

In the nineteenth century, popular devotion appears slowly but surely to have again taken mastery of the site. In particular, the annual *Kaarskensprocessie* (candle procession), dating from 1629, developed into a large-scale confla-

tion of devotion and commercial activity, with devotional articles of every shape and size and other wares on sale in countless stalls inside the little town. And candles of course! Once the Virgin carried round in procession had passed by, the bundles of candles were quickly blown out and saved to bring light in difficult times at home. The candles, but also the countless little prints, flags and other souvenirs, available and affordable for ever larger groups, brought the devotion to Our Lady of Scherpenheuvel into every Catholic household in the region and far beyond. On the majority of these religious souvenirs – for example on the print with the Pious Home Blessing, distributed far and wide in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – the Virgin's logo remains her original resting-place, the oak. The cupola and towers of the church are, in most cases, clearly recognizable in the background.

Exceptional but not unique

The allegorical overall design of Scherpenheuvel was exceptional, but most of its component parts are not unique. For example, the pattern of a little image hanging 'from immemorial times' in a tree, the miracle-working qualities of which suddenly bring it to public attention (leading to the expansion of the cult, the involvement of the local clergy and the bishopric, and the building of succes-

sive, more appropriate shelters), is repeated on several sites in the early days of the archdiocese: Duffel and Jezus-Eik being just some of the best known. Nor was the close connection between (the revival of) certain older cult sites and the special attention bestowed on it by representatives of the Habsburg dynasty unique to Scherpenheuvel. History has it that governor Alexander Farnese, in 1585, visited the first chapel in Gaverland, in the bishopric of Ghent, to plead for Our Lady's support for his siege of Antwerp.²⁷ Even if apocryphal, it accurately confirms the notion of a close connection between the Spanish authorities and the veneration of Mary. It was from Spain also that the habit came of decking out images in expensive garments.

Albrecht's initial preference was for the pilgrimage site of Halle in the Archdiocese of Cambrai, where a 'black' Madonna had been venerated since the thirteenth century. High-ranking rulers visited it, and during the siege of the city in 1580 by Calvinistic Brussels, she is said to have appeared on the city walls stopping the cannon balls. Albrecht visited Our Lady of Halle already during his Joyous Entry in 1596 and later returned regularly with Isabella, including on the eve of their marriage. In 1603, however, their attention was drawn by the bleeding Virgin of Scherpenheuvel. Growing public interest led, ultimately, to the design and construction of a new national sanctuary with all the trappings of Loreto. And just as Loreto had been the inspiration for the building of Scherpenheuvel – and a number of more modest chapels, holy houses or other copies of Loreto – so in turn the central building at Scherpenheuvel would place its stamp on later Marian chapels and churches.²⁸

It would take us too far to mention here all – or even only the largest – sites of Marian veneration in the Archdiocese of Mechelen. And even if the development of Scherpenheuvel as a Marian bulwark and 'litany in stone' remains unique, the site can serve as a summary of what we see happening elsewhere on a smaller scale. At least, that is, until the arrival of the French. In view of this, and the severing of the entanglement of Church and State, the

Church was forced to use other, more 'internally' directed strategies to look after its interests. The imagery surrounding Mary also changed slowly but surely.

Let me refer, finally, to a movement of remarkable change which, starting from the Rue du Bac in Paris, spread throughout the Catholic world, redefining the attitude but, in particular, the colour of the Immaculata. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, immaculate white becomes Our Lady's preferred colour for manifesting herself, thereby ousting the radiant sun of the Book of Revelation as the official logo of the Immaculate Conception.

Let her be well-behaved

The white-veiled Virgin who appeared repeatedly to Sister Catherine Labouré at the Rue du Bac in 1830 asked her, at the second showing, to have a medallion made of her appearance. She stood in an oval of light, on a hemisphere, rays of grace streaming from her hands and surrounded by the words: *O Mary, conceived without sin [...]*.²⁹ The medal that was struck – originally known as 'Medal of Mary's Immaculate Conception', but better known as the 'Miraculous Medal' – was distributed far and wide. Millions were distributed and sold. Protagonists like to believe that the formulation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 was influenced by this. The fact is, however, that this formulation had been posing



83. Design for an exhibition throne, Huidenberg, Onze-Lieve-Vrouw [see fig. 234]

problems to theologians for fifteen centuries, and it is hardly likely that the visions of a (then still) illiterate nun resolved it. The pronouncement had, first and foremost, an ecclesiastical-political function. But it is not inconceivable that the widespread distribution and popularity of the medal influenced ecclesiastical-political considerations. Four years after the declaration of the dogma, the Immaculate Conception appeared to Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, this time clothed entirely in white and with a light blue sash. Bernadette had apparently never heard the name 'Immaculate Conception' (with which the Lady in the grotto introduced herself), a fact that was taken as a sign of the veracity of her appearances. But she did know the miraculous medal and later also compared the Lady in the grotto with the figure on the medal.

After these first, much talked-about appearances of the Immaculata, a trend was started and Mary appears – in particular in Europe – in most cases as the Immaculate Conception. Luminous with grace and clad in an immaculate white garment (at times with blue touches), she represents her own immaculate nature in a highly plastic fashion. In this way she appeared, *inter alia*, in Knock (Ireland) in 1879, in Fatima in 1917, in Beauraing in 1932, and in Banneux in 1933, preferably to children. In places where she had not appeared but where the faithful wished to share her miraculous power, grottos or chapels were set up with an image of Our Lady of Lourdes. Other older Madonnas also share in this new radiance of the Immaculata and exchange their extensive wardrobes for snow-white garments.³⁰

During her appearances, the Immaculate Conception generally does not reveal her intentions. She may ask for a medal or a chapel, but for the children she also has another, moral message. She who remained without sin likes to see her example imitated. To the children in Beauraing who ask her what she wants of them (a Lourdes grotto is already there, she appeared just above it), she answers directly, 'For you to be very good.' Diligent prayer is something else she likes to see. The Queen of Heaven of the Apocalypse reveals herself as a moral schoolmistress, as an example of purity

in a period of supposed moral decline. This is widely seen as being situated in the fast-growing working class (which the new workers' movements was also targeting), and in the extension of its own tradition, interpreted first and foremost as depravation *in sexualibus* and the threatening of the family as the 'germ cell' of the church.³¹

These white or light-blue Maries of Lourdes are burned into the retinas of countless Catholics. They stood – and still stand – on prints and on Marian calendars, and are mass produced as plaster statues, water flasks and the like. In the Netherlands, the snow-white (and morally conservative) Immaculata has coagulated in the imagery used by the protagonists of a fifth Marian dogma.³² At the other end of the same moral spectrum Mary received, in 2008, a huge new glossy magazine in her name, with which the Dutch Catholic broadcasting association KRO is hoping to attract new audiences. This glossy 'Mary is sexy and brutal, surprises us with spiritual sex and vital questions and distributes shopping tips and private secrets'. The new Mary's message is 'to show that the KRO also enjoys life and is no longer boringly good.'³³

Mary appears to be able to tap new sources.

Over the past centuries, she has also served various offensive moves. In the past century this message was, first and foremost, targeting good behaviour, also in Flanders.³⁴ But the *Our Lady of Flanders* that is sung in Flanders' most popular Marian hymn – which celebrates



84. *Virgin Mary with Child and Flemish family*, Averbode (Scherpenheuvel-Zichem), Norbertine Abbey Averbode [see fig. 21]

85.
Our Lady
of the
Scapular,
Geel,
Saint Dimpna
[see fig. 100]



its centenary this year! – is ultimately not the good teacher of morality, even if she may ‘live as the best mother in every Flemish family’ (*als de beste moeder wonen in elk Vlaamse huisgezin*). Our Lady of Flanders ‘smiles to us from lime branches, flower garlands or gay festoons’ (*lacht ons toe uit lindegroen, bloemenkrans of blij festoen*). I imagine her secretly smiling when carried round in solemn procession in Mechelen’s annual Hanwijk procession, with all the city dignitaries at her feet. She is enthroned in the Flemish heart, is given a thousand loving names and stands generously alongside even doubting believers ‘now and in the hour of our death’. Admittedly, she is easily misused. But ultimately she soars above all this, on the unfathomable paths that testify to her divinity.

- 1 The dogma of the Immaculate Conception states that Mary herself was conceived without spot or stain of original sin. God preserved her from this at the time of her own conception, to make her worthy of being the Mother of God.
- 2 According to Brandenburg 1990: 15 and 201, note 2.
- 3 The following paragraphs refer back to my book *Is dit mijn lichaam? Visioenen van het volmaakte lichaam in katholieke moraal en mystiek* (1998), where a more detailed bibliography can be found.
- 4 In contemporary Gnostic texts in a New Age context we find the frequently recurring statement that the Old Testament God who created matter is another or lesser God (mostly called a *demiurge*).
- 5 I Cor. 15:22.
- 6 In the new Dutch language bible translation, the *Nieuwe Bijbel Vertaling* (NBV), published in 2004, the word *sarx* in the prologue to St John’s gospel is no longer translated as ‘flesh’ but as ‘human being’. In most other places the now loaded concept of ‘flesh’ is avoided in the NBV by translating *sarx* as ‘body’. This has the effect of abolishing the distinction between *sarx* and *soma*, which is certainly not unimportant in the case of St Paul (the concept of *soma* is mostly neutrally or positively connoted; the latter in particular where the body serves as a metaphor for cooperation within the church community).
- 7 Cf. Dresen 1998, chapter I: ‘Het lichaam de baas blijven’, and the bibliography.
- 8 See, *inter alia* Brown 1990.
- 9 Luther remains strongly influenced by the pessimistic streak in Augustinian anthropology as to the blackness and unavoidability of original sin. But, in his view, one cannot escape from it in one’s own power or through institutional arrangements, like celibacy.
- 10 Just as Jesus (of the host) is referred to, in the Middle Dutch, as *Onze-Lieve-Heer* (literally, our dear Lord).
- 11 The four canonical gospels tell us little about Mary’s life, the details of which (her ‘falling asleep’ and her assumption into heaven were to become mariologically important) were taken from apocryphal gospels like the Gospel of James or other esoteric legends, and then metaphorically linked with Scriptural passages that do not (directly) relate to Mary, but could possibly refer to her.
- 12 In these ecclesiological-Marian interpretations, it was customary to associate the shining Bride of the Lamb mentioned in the final chapters of the Book of Revelations (the Holy City or New Jerusalem, interpreted as the church) symbolically with the Woman travelling in birth who appears as a sign in heaven in Revelation 12, ‘clothed with the sun’ and battling with the Dragon who is seeking to devour her child.
- 13 As an interpretation of Song of Songs 4.7: ‘Thou art all fair, my love, there is no spot on thee.’
- 14 Hymns of praise to the neck of the beloved in Song of Songs 4.4.
- 15 A rich collection of these metaphors (developed on Mary’s most important honorific titles) is to be found in Marina Warner’s study (1989).
- 16 For further explanation and the relevant literature, see: Dresen 1998, chapter II, ‘Het betere bloed’.
- 17 What follows is based, in particular, on the study by Duerloo & Wingens 2002. Chapter 5 of this book has the same title as the one I chose for this article – referring to the popular hymn to Our Lady of Flanders by A. Cuppens (text) and L. De Vocht (music) from 1909.

- 18 Duerloo & Wingens 2002: 55, 69 and 153.
- 19 Ibid.: 91.
- 20 Ibid.: 96.
- 21 Ibid.: 149–150. Around 1602, the archducal pair joined the Fraternity of our Lady of the Seven Woes in Brussels and provided financial support to its devotional practices. In this fraternity, Our Lady's sufferings were again connected with the apostasy of the Northern Netherlands.
- 22 Quotation from Duerloo & Wingens 2002: 154–155. It is possible that the seven exterior altars of the basilica church, dedicated to the joys and sorrows of Mary, go back to this assignment.
- 23 Cf.: Duerloo & Wingens 2002: 170–181.
- 24 In order to avoid the obstacle of Augustine's teaching on original sin, the story was often interpreted as if Mary was conceived not from sex, but from the pure embrace under the Holy Gate.
- 25 On the efforts of members of the Habsburg monarchy to have the dogma proclaimed (between 1616 and 1619, and again in 1621 and 1623, by new popes), see Duerloo & Wingens 2002: 163.
- 26 'Mother of the Creator' – one of the invocations of the Litany of Loreto.
- 27 The story (noted in 1886 by pastor Livinus Marquenie in his history of the image) is probably apocryphal, but created its own reality. It was immortalized also in the present chapel, on the central panel of the 1865 communion bench.
- 28 The cupola construction of Scherpenheuvel was adopted – on a smaller scale – by, for example, the pilgrimage chapel in Duffel and (much later, but strikingly similar) by the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw chapel in Geraardsbergen and the Mariakerk in Schaerbeek. In the last case, even the stars of the roof were copied.
- 29 Around the Virgin was the inscription: 'O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us, who have recourse to you' (translation from French). The medal was in metal, but on (other) representations of the appearance the colour white, the symbol of purity, predominates. On the reverse of the medal is an M holding up a cross and two hearts (one with a crown of thorns, one pierced with a sword), all surrounded by twelve stars.
- 30 See for example www.Mariadoorvlaanderen.be, under 'Kalender' for attractive examples of white-clad Madonnas.
- 31 See also Dresen 1998, chapter VI: 'Liefdevolle macht en de metafoor van het lichaam'.
- 32 This fifth Marian dogma would pronounce her to be co-redemptrix. The logo of the international movement that is campaigning for this is the Lady of all Peoples, drawn after the many visions of Ida Peerdeman (between 1945 and 1959). See www.de-vrouwe.net or (constantly being monitored) nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vrouwe_van_alle_Volkeren.
- 33 According to the editor-in-chief of 'Maria' in the newspaper *Trouw*, 28.8.2008.
- 34 Good moral behaviour, the repercussions of which could still be felt in reactions to the poster for the dance production *Onze Lieve Vrouw van Vlaanderen* (Our Lady of Flanders) in 2005, in which Mary held a baby against her bare breast. The naked breast – for many years a much-loved image of Mary as Alma Mater, a symbol of the Church – evoked reactions of shock.

